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ABSTRACT

"Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education," the 1984 federal study group report on excellence, identifies three conditions vital to the improvement of undergraduate education: student involvement, high expectations, and assessment and feedback. Of these, student involvement was judged most important and is most germane to successful developmental work. Two of the report's recommendations which have particular importance for developmental English involve the use of more active modes of teaching, and the mandate to encourage students to take greater responsibility for their learning. Strategies that promote more active modes of teaching include severely curtailing lecturing, rotating seating, walking around the room, having students write out every sentence in every exercise, and dividing classes into small groups. Students can be encouraged to take greater responsibility for their learning if they write their own attendance policy sheet; learn to set goals by two-week segments; and establish specific objectives related to vocabulary, spelling, and studying. Goal-setting techniques and strategies for active involvement are more readily implemented within the right atmosphere. Using seminar tables rather than desks, inviting another class to participate in a class session, and encouraging the involvement of older students are all ways to help create an environment more conducive to active student participation. (LAL)

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PARTICIPANTS IN LEARNING, NOT SPECTATORS

paper presented at the University System
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Developmental Studies
Jekyll Island, Georgia
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Charles F. Totten

One year following the government's report on the nation's public schools, the much-publicized "A Nation at Risk," it is now the colleges' turn to be scrutinized. September 1984 saw publication of the work of a federal study group on excellence. Entitled "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education," this wide-ranging report seeks such laudable ends as improved learning, revitalized teaching, increased student retention, a restored liberal arts curriculum at the heart of the educational adventure, and a reinvigorated baccalaureate degree which may once again mean something as a guarantor of the shared traditions and knowledge by which we, as a nation, stand.

The report seeks to maximize certain Conditions of Excellence which can be measured by means of desired and well publicized "student outcomes." Here "outcomes" are understood to include "knowledge,

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intellectual capacities, and skills"--the cognitive areas; but also to embrace "other dimensions of student growth, such as self-confidence, persistence, leadership, empathy, social responsibility, and understanding of cultural and intellectual differences"--the so-called "affective domain" of learning.

The boldest stroke of this document may be its assertion of the primacy of the affective domain. This is also the point at which an earnest governmental report coincides most happily with the aims of Developmental Studies, although it is by no means clear that the authors were aware of the coincidence. Researchers in our field, John and Suanne Roueche, and others, as well as toilers in the Developmental vineyards, have known all along that the affective areas--how a student feels about himself as a learner, how well he can overcome a long history of failure, how much responsibility he can learn to accept, both for his destiny as a learner and as a sojourner in life generally--that these dimensions of the learning process are at least as vital to success as are the cognitive.

The report identifies three Conditions for Excellence vital to the improvement of undergraduate education: student involvement, high expectations, and assessment and feedback. Of the three, student involvement is judged "perhaps the most important," and it is this Condition (of involvement) I wish to address as the most germane to successful developmental work.

Student involvement is defined as "how much time, energy, and effort students devote to the learning process." Research has demonstrated the obvious, that "the more time and effort students invest. . .

the greater will be their growth and achievement"; however, what has not been so obvious is the further observation that "the more intensely they engage in their own education" the more felicitous their outcomes in college will be.

The report bores in on the issue of active involvement: "colleges clearly can control the conditions of active learning by expecting students to be participants in, rather than spectators of, the learning process" (emphasis added).

In its "Recommendations for Increasing Student Involvement," the report observes that "Traditional classroom practice in higher education favors the assertive student. But our analysis indicates that instructors should give greater attention to the passive or reticent student." In fact, the report further claims, and rightly so, that "the passive student is one of the greatest challenges facing higher education." In order to reach that student and retain him in our institutions, as well as to direct our teaching of all students towards better learning and stronger retention track-records, the following specific recommendations for involvement are tendered by the federal panel.

1. All institutional resources, faculty included, ought to be reallocated to achieve increased service to first- and second-year students. The aim is "intense intellectual interaction between students and instructors." The buzzword is "front-loading," whereby the very finest instructors are placed as a matter of policy into first-year classes.

2. Faculty need to make "greater use of active modes of teaching and require that students take greater responsibility for their learning."

3. A mix of teaching styles is called for, with lecturing strongly discouraged; in its place are recommended various projects, hands-on exercises, small-group discussions, in-class presentations and debates.

The implications of this report for Developmental Studies are far reaching. We know that a strong developmental program is a factor in retention; in some cases, it is the only factor. John Roueche has persuasively demonstrated the connection between the affective and cognitive domains of learning with developmental students, such that, as a student's assessment of the degree of control he exerts over his learning increases--the psychological "internality" so crucial to academic success--so his scores on English and math tests correspondingly increase. Developmental faculties know the importance of front-loading: the institution's best teachers ought to be teaching its worst students, to put it bluntly. We know, too, the importance of focusing our energies on the passive student, though it takes a great deal of effort and will at times to do so. We probably know intuitively what this report makes so explicit: that close interaction between faculty and student, both in and out of class, makes all the difference. The involved student feels good about himself and good about his place within the institution. He studies harder, sets more ambitious goals, learns more rapidly and in greater depth.

Developmental faculties may take the lead in showing our colleagues how to implement improvements in teaching needed to realize the noble Conditions for Excellence that are detailed in this report. At the same time, we may take this opportunity to direct our classroom practices at the desired student outcomes we all strive to attain.

Here I wish to concentrate and expand on two of the most significant recommendations of the report, with particular reference to Developmental English. They are: (1) more active modes

of teaching (a mix of teaching styles), and (2) the mandate to get students to take greater responsibility for their learning. Here, then, are some practical suggestions and strategies to enliven the classroom and engage our students as participants in, rather than spectators of, learning.

A. MORE ACTIVE MODES OF TEACHING

1. Severely curtail lecturing. When it becomes necessary to convey a specific body of information to the whole class, interrupt their activities for a few minutes, get their attention, and convey the information. Then let them return to whatever it was they were doing.

2. Rotate seating every day or so; keep the physical environment fluid. We all know the classroom dynamic of the front-row eager beavers vs. the back-row yawners and hat wearers. Let's give everyone a shot at the front and back rows, as well as the middle rows, and see what happens!

3. Walk around the room almost constantly during class, if physically possible; look over shoulders; take pen in hand and do as much coaching as you can.

4. Have them write out every sentence in every exercise (active involvement vs. passive text-marking) in a spiral notebook. Try the trick of the red, green, and black pens: subjects in red, verbs in green (verbs make the sentence "go" after all!); try direct objects in red, indirect in green; try double underlining non-restrictive clauses in red or green to reinforce the idea of <u>surrounding</u> NR clauses with commas (restrictive clauses would then logically be singly underlined); how about a big, bold red semicolon joining two independent clauses to dramatize this particular repair of the dread comma splice, or a big, fat green comma and a red conjunction for an alternative patching job on a spliced compound sentence.

5. Divide a class into small groups and set them the task of thrashing out the grammar exercises together until something of a consensus is reached. Monitor their work. Keep an eye on the clock and save plenty of time for each group to explain its assigned exercises to the rest of the class. See to it that everyone in every group recites. Appoint Group A to check on and/or challenge the answers of Group D, for example, and shift group responsibility frequently. Keep it lively. Shift the membership of each group every week or so; and be careful to pair a reticent student with an assertive one. Gently see to it that Mr. Passive recites as often as he will.

B. ENCOURAGEMENT OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

The second recommendation of the report, getting people to take responsibility for their learning, may be more difficult to put in place in the classroom, for it is more attitudinal than procedural. However, even here there are ways, and they boil down to goal-setting. I am absolutely convinced that John Roueche is right in his insistence that Developmental Studies can combat psychological "externality"--the experiential notion that almost anything is to blame for one's failure, so long as it is external to the individual: race, class, genes, home environment, the teacher doesn't like me, I'm too fat, etc., etc. The more we can foster internality and motivation, the more we can work toward getting them to accept responsibility for their destinies in education and in life. Goal-setting is a first step.

1. I have recently begun having them write their own attendance policy sheet in the first week of the quarter. They explain our divisional policy in their own words, then enunciate their own goal for attendance, after some thought about what might be a reasonable expectation. Signed and submitted, these documents may be quasi-legally binding; but, more important, they are the student's own active involvement in this area of his performance and fate.

2. Goal-setting by two-week segments, an example keyed to the Georgia University System Basic Skills Exam and Regent's Testing Program exam.

   (a) by the end of Week 2 -- have a list of all grammatical skills tested on the BSE; have written out all relevant exercises; have <u>explained</u> something publicly to someone

   (b) by the end of Week 4 -- to be within 5 points of a passing score on the Mock BSE (70 passing); to have written 5 paragraphs of various types, all corrected and rewritten

   (c) by the end of Week 6 -- to be within 1 or 2 points of a passing score on Mock BSE #2; to have produced two essays of 350 words each, four paragraphs, corrected and revised

(d) by the end of Week 8 -- to be at passing score on Mock BSE #3; to have two additional essays written, 400 word minimum, corrected and revised

(e) by the end of Week 10 - above passing on exit exam BSE; have one to three Mock RTP-type essays written of passing quality, preferably on the first submission.

(f) COURSE GOAL: 70+ BSE / PASSING ESSAY

3. Other possible goals

(a) vocabulary goal -- 10 new, useful words/week, picked up from reading and listening, listed, defined, learned, practiced

(b) spelling goal -- accumulate as long a list as possible of words habitually misspelled; print them out, memorize and practice

(c) studytime goal -- two hours outside class for every hour in; quiet time; keep a log of time spent and learning accomplished; find hours between classes and go to same spot in library; stay away from the student center except for lunch and specified, limited breaks.

The goal-setting techniques and strategies for active involvement just outlined will be more readily implemented in an atmosphere of the following three Theories of Developmental Instruction. I do not claim originality, or even that they are theories in any strict sense; however, my contention that they should be tried out, pursued, even institutionalized, may be an original contribution to our profession's awakened dialogue on self-improvement. Disarmingly simple, they are: the Theory of Tables, the Theory of Guest Classes, and the Theory of the Older Student. Taken together, they provide something like the optimal setting in which to put in place our various attempts to personalize and humanize teaching, to engage our students more productively in their own education.

Perhaps my training in literary criticism has made me more than usually sensitive to setting. For just as a story or novel cannot unfold in a vacuum, and just as setting in literature invariably dictates an atmosphere or mood, so the setting of any event is critical to its outcome. The traditional classroom setting of rows of desks headed by a magisterial lecture podium up front is, in my opinion, absolutely hostile to the kind of teaching and learning we seek. [Etymologically, English "row" derives from an ancient root word meaning to scratch, tear out or cut; ripped, riven and reaped (torn from the ground) are historical cognates. Rows of desks, then, bear anything but cohesive implications].

The Theory of Tables states, "Provide your developmental classes with seminar tables to sit at, not desks." Recall that the panel on excellence challenges all institutions to a reallocation of resources for first- and second-year classes. The reduction in class size that is implied in a move to furnish classrooms with tables is an example of such reallocation already underway in some colleges. The tables themselves are a miniscule investment for a disproportionately large return in classroom esprit.

I have an unconscionably large developmental class this quarter (twenty-four), but all of us are spread out over three tables, eight to a table. I have mixed the tables by age, gender and race. Each has its captain and co-captain responsible for taking roll, keeping attention focused on the task at hand, leading discussions and collecting work submitted. The atmosphere is relaxed, democratic, cooperative; and I am convinced that such an atmosphere is not nearly so well engendered in rows of desks. One interesting advantage of the tables is that there is no fixed place for me. I sit wherever there is a

vacant chair, but never for more than a few minutes. Teaching this class is a physical workout: I walk from table to table, coaching as I go. Students beckon me and I have to keep track of who has next claim on my attention.

I even like to keep table membership fluid. If one-third of the class, say, needs more drill on a specific problem of grammar than the others, I will position these eight at one table, move the other sixteen to the other two tables, and work directly with the first group while the remainder brainstorm a new essay topic, proofread a completed essay, or begin a new chapter in the workbook. Since this particular class meets in the conference room of the Student Center, I will occasionally send certain students into the lounge area immediately outside our door to work on a problem. In fine weather I will even send some out to tables in the sun, keeping those within who are bothered by conversation when they are trying to write.

The whole point of a fluid setting is to foster sharing and individual responsibility. I can "trust" eight or ten people to go outside unsupervised and actually accomplish something, for the physical arrangement of the seminar tables has created a milieu of trust, as well as cooperation and relaxation of endemic fears of being "called on." Without their realizing it, they are indeed called on all the time, but with a twist: in this setting they are called to encourage and assist each other. And they do.

The Theory of Guest Classes was born as a favor and grew out of a serendipity. Asked to field an ailing colleague's class one day, I brought them in with mine. People were hanging from the chandeliers with bewildered looks at first, and clearly such a mob was not going

to fit around our three tables. But three minutes of close-order drill on my part soon had six groups at work out in the lounge area (two guest students paired with four of mine in each group) for nearly an hour of intense and often hilarious punctuation drill. The experiment was built on the proposition that one truly learns something only when he teaches it. Thus with my students as teachers, our guests as learners, my students stood to profit the most. However, the serendipity was to discover that both groups said they understood better than before. (A followup quiz confirmed their claim). The day went so well, in fact, that we did it again the following week--this time with my class as guests of the other--and intend to do it at somewhat regular intervals henceforth, even in good faculty health.

Of the three theories, that of the Older Student is of greatest, most encompassing import. I have yet to speak with a fellow professor of any discipline who does not beam at the recollection of older students in his classes (a phenomenon of roughly the last dozen years in higher education). They raise the tone of any class; they are there to learn; after an initial reticence, they are generally afraid of nothing and will tell you so; they will listen to you, weigh and challenge what you say; they set good examples of learning style for the younger students; they are invariably generous without being parental. These qualities obtain in any class peopled with returning students; in developmental classes, though, the benefits are doubled and tripled, for a developmental teacher needs all the allies he can get. Older students take on passive young ones as a challenge, relax them and urge them to participate in a way no professor can. They provide tension-breaking humor, often of the self-deprecating kind, without

degenerating into foolishness. Goal oriented and driven with purpose, they hunger to learn and move beyond the developmental level. Their ambition is infectious. With them there is little of that nauseating adolescent hatred of literacy. They know they are deficient but they also know they don't want to remain that way. They can help an instructor shape up a class and keep it pointed in the right direction.

A corollary to the Older Student theory is my firm belief that institutions ought to recruit returning students with as much vigor as they do the traditional. I do not believe we do nearly enough of this. Many find their way into our classes, but random matriculation is insufficient. Older students, particularly women in their 30's, are a great untapped resource in any community. For every one who finds her way in, there are three to five of her friends who ought to be sought, recruited, welcomed and accomodated. This is another example of the reallocation of resources that is urged on us today. Properly managed, an intense campaign for older students can offset the declines in enrollment suffered in virtually every college in the country. Colleges and communities alike can only profit from such campaigns. The older student may well be our salvation.

Insofar as a governmental report can ring with purpose and challenge, this one does. "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education" wants to see better teaching and better learning overall. Its thesis is radically simple: we must retain our students and teach them better than ever before, have them enter into their learning and produce more of it than heretofore, all of this to be accomplished largely using existing resources.

The focus is sharply on us, the professoriate, with some few issues raised that touch on administrative and fiscal policy. But ponder the report's summation of our colleges' best resource:

> Effective teachers care passionately both about their subject matter and about their students. They are concerned with getting their students to hone their skills in writing and speaking, to extend their abilities in critical thinking and analysis, and to develop their capacities to synthesize, imagine, and create.

We are the resource, and there is always room for us to grow and improve. Let us put our heads together as a profession, resist complacency, and begin to answer such challenges as this with our best thinking, our innate resourcefulness, our love and concern for what we do.

Dalton, Georgia
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